

*The God of the Gospel of John*. By Marianne Meye Thompson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001, x + 269 pp., \$22.00.\*

The present volume has the distinction of having received an award of merit in biblical studies from the *Christianity Today* 2002 book awards. At the outset, it should be noted that not all the material included in *The God of the Gospel of John* appears here for the first time. Two of the five chapters (chaps. 2 and 5) were previously published (in *The Promise of the Father* and the journal *Semeia* respectively). A partially overlapping volume entitled *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* was released by Westminster John Knox in 2000.

In the introduction to her book, the author recalls lamenting to her friend, Professor Andrew Lincoln, that every time she tried to write about God she ended up writing about Jesus. Dr. Lincoln's response was: "And what does that tell you?" Undeterred by such counsel, Thompson has not abandoned her original thesis (reviving the argument of C. K. Barrett) that John's Gospel is theocentric rather than Christocentric. As Thompson herself concedes, her thesis represents a minority view, as is amply documented by a 1985 *Forschungsbericht* by Robert Kysar, who sketched the virtual consensus among Johannine scholars that the heartbeat of John's theology is his Christology.

Thompson devotes five chapters to demonstrating her thesis: The Meaning of "God" (chap. 1); The Living Father (chap. 2); The Knowledge of God (chap. 3); The Spirit of God (chap. 4); and The Worship of God (chap. 5). Chap. 1 focuses on the uses of the word "god" (*theos*). Correctly understood, Thompson notes, "god" is not a proper name but a predication, often used in relation to those claiming allegiance to a deity. The term is also (in a limited number of instances) applied to human beings entrusted with a divine commission. Defying the conventional distinction between a "functional" and an "ontological" Christology, so Thompson, John describes Jesus' nature by his exercise of divine prerogatives (e.g. 5:25–27).

Epithets for God in John's Gospel include "the only God" (5:44), "God the Father" (6:27), "the only true God" (17:3), and "my God and your God" (20:17; cf. 20:28). The frequently repeated relational description "the Father who sent me" corresponds to the portrayal of Jesus as the Son. The Gospel also contains several crucial ascriptions of deity to Jesus and repeated affirmations of his unity with God (esp. 5:23, 25–26; 10:30; cf. 5:18). Having said this, however, even the climactic acknowledgment of Jesus as "my Lord and my God" in 20:28, according to Thompson, does not eclipse John's characterization of Jesus as dependent upon and authorized by the Father.

Chap. 2 turns to the most common designation of God in John, that of "Father." Thompson notes that the expression is used foremost by Jesus to describe his unique relationship to God. In keeping with Jewish culture, "father" conveys the notions of origin of life, authority, and loving care. Each of these aspects (as in the OT and Second Temple Judaism) is related to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. Further topics of discussion are the expression "the living God" (within the framework of Johannine "realized eschatology"), the "I am" sayings (against the backdrop of Exod 3:14 and Isaiah 40–66), and the phrases "the Father who sent me" (in relation to the Son's role as emissary or agent) and "the Father loves the Son."

Concerning the Father's sending of the Son, Thompson favorably cites P. Meyer's contention that the Fourth Gospel features not so much a sending Christology but a theology of the one who sends. Yet it seems precarious to pit a "theology of one sending" against a "theology of one sent." The potential relevance of the possible Christological designation "Sent" in 9:7 should also be considered here. In addition, Thompson takes exception to viewing 14:28 ("The Father is greater than I") as an example of Johannine "subordinationism," considering it fallacious to view the Father–Son relationship primarily in hierarchical terms. Rather, the Father is presented as "the source of the Son's life" and as "the origin of the Son's very being" (p. 94). This "solution," however, seems to raise more problems than it solves, for it raises the specter of the Father's ontological superiority, a

notion universally rejected by Christological orthodoxy.

"Knowledge of God" is the topic of chap. 3. Under this rubric, Thompson investigates the role of "seeing" and "hearing" in John and explores several ways in which the Gospel conceives of the manifestation of God's presence in the world. Regarding the former issue, Thompson differs sharply with Bultmann (who argued that in John "hearing" is central and the preferred way of coming to faith), contending that the supreme good in John is rather that of seeing God. (Too little is made, however, of 20:29.) The second question taken up is John's portrayal of Jesus in relation to agency figures. The author concludes that Johannine Christology is framed primarily in terms of divine attributes (Word and Wisdom) rather than human mediator figures (prophets or legal agents). However, in light of obvious parallels with Moses and other figures, one wonders if this dichotomy is unduly disjunctive.

Chap. 4 is devoted to the Spirit of God. Here Thompson challenges the conventional focus on the Christological rather than theological dimension of the Spirit in John. She is also critical of a unilateral focus on chaps. 13–17 and of a primarily historical approach, preferring to study the issue more synthetically and theologically. Thompson proceeds to investigate Jesus and the descent of the Spirit (1:32–33); the Spirit as life giving (3:3–8); Jesus as the giver of the Spirit (3:34–35; 6:63–64); the Spirit and the risen Christ (chaps. 14–16); and the Father and the Spirit. Contrary to the prevailing Christological consensus, Thompson finds that John portrays the Spirit foremost in relation to the Father's life-giving power.

The fifth and final chap. deals with the worship of God. In it Thompson sets out to reexamine relevant passages utilizing a taxonomy of contemporary Jewish polemics concerning worship derived from a study of Second Temple literature. This taxonomy ranges from assimilationist (acquiescing to Antiochus Epiphanes) to nonassimilationist (Philo, Josephus, *Sib. Or.*), separationist (*Jos. Asen.*, 1 *Enoch*, *Jub.*, *Jdt*), and sectarian (DSS). Johannine polemic, according to Thompson, does not charge Judaism with idolatry but rather confronts it with its need to keep up to date. In recognition that the eschatological hour of fulfillment has come in Jesus, the proper focus of Jewish worship must now be on him.

Thompson, against the grain of much of recent Johannine scholarship, also calls for a nuancing of the common understanding that Jesus "replaces" or "supersedes" Jewish festivals such as Passover, preferring instead to describe the nature of Jesus' work as Passover clarifying and illumining (p. 219). Thomas's confession of Jesus as "my Lord and my God" is viewed as John presenting Jesus "as the one *through* whom worship is directed to God" (p. 225). This, however, does not seem to do full justice to the confession of 20:28 which implies direct worship of Jesus as God rather than presenting him as merely a vehicle or means through whom God may be worshipped.

To summarize, if Thompson had her way, Johannine scholarship would need to view Jesus in terms of Word and Wisdom rather than prophet or legal agent and drop the distinction between a "functional" and an "ontological" Christology (chap. 1); desist from speaking about a "sending" as well as a "subordinationist Christology" (chap. 2); focus on "seeing" rather than "hearing" God in Jesus (chap. 3); conceive of the Spirit in John in primarily theological rather than Christological terms (chap. 4); and understand Johannine worship as primarily theologically rather than Christologically oriented (chap. 5). If correct, this would significantly alter the landscape of Johannine studies.

Apart from whether or not all of Thompson's theses are judged valid (indeed, her efforts to bring about a paradigm shift on the subject represents a veritable *tour de force*), she ought to be commended for her original, thought-provoking work and for her grasp of the vast body of scholarly literature on the subject. In several cases Thompson's findings serve to correct, or at least to help nuance, conventional stereotypes. Space does not permit a detailed critique of each of the above-summarized theses. A brief word on the author's general thrust, a reorientation from a primarily Christological to a properly theological reading of John's Gospel, must suffice. Is Thompson correct

in urging such a shift?

While she has doubtless shown that God is often not given his due in the study of John's Gospel, I remain unconvinced that the evidence presented by Thompson calls for a paradigm shift, for the simple reason that the entire Gospel rather transparently appears to be focused on Christology, from the identification of the Word—Jesus—as God to Thomas's climactic confession of Jesus as his Lord and God followed by the purpose statement calling on people to believe that the Christ and Son of God is Jesus. The distinctive difference between Johannine Christianity and Judaism is hardly belief in God; rather, the central question is Christological: is Jesus who he claimed to be or not?

By choosing not to challenge directly the almost self-evident Christological nature and focus of John's Gospel, Thompson largely leaves the foundational Christological framework of the Fourth Gospel intact, which is why I question whether in the end she will succeed in overturning the scholarly consensus on this issue. What, then, is the answer to Barrett's famous question regarding John's Gospel, "Christocentric or Theocentric?" Or, to put it differently, was the question that foremost occupied the fourth evangelist and his readership, "Who is God?," or was it, "Who is Jesus?" Despite Thompson's valiant effort, I believe the answer must continue to be the latter rather than the former.

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\*This review first appeared in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (2002): 521–24 and is posted with permission.